

# *What to Do with a B.A. What to Do with an English Major*

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## **SKILLS POSSESSED BY ENGLISH UNDERGRADUATES:**

Many employers are interested in the skills which English majors tend to possess. These include:

- ability to read and write articulately and analytically
- comprehensive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary
- ability to listen, clarify, question, and respond comprehensively
- ability to conduct and clearly explain research results
- ability to make critical observations
- skills in organizing ideas, materials, and people
- ability to think creatively
- ability to present persuasive arguments
- skills in textual analysis and interpretation

## **SAMPLE JOB TITLES FOR ENGLISH UNDERGRADUATES:**

(some may require additional education and / or training beyond the undergraduate degree)

copywriter	media planner	project
consumer researcher	media publishing	director
public relations/information specialist	assistant buyer	creative
corporate communications specialist	editorial assistant	director
policy and procedures analyst	publications	publisher
radio/television researcher	researcher	film
educational sales representative	manuscript reader	researcher
information abstractor/indexer	book critic	volunteer
journalist (newspaper/magazine/broadcast)	novelist	coordinator
editor	public speaker	market
(magazine/news/newspaper/publications/copy/film/video)	real estate agent	researcher
special events coordinator	documentation	fundraiser
customer service representative	specialist	proofreader
radio/television commentator	poet	marketing
script writer	film critic	assistant
website developer	tutor	promotion
instructional designer	technical writer	specialist
	freelance writer	account
		executive
		literary
		assistant
		playwright

### **AREAS OF EMPLOYMENT: (this list is not exhaustive)**

advertising / marketing agencies	market research firms
newspapers / magazines / books	television / radio stations
consulting firms	banks / financial institutions
publishing companies	public relations firms
real estate agencies	libraries
non profit organizations	communications firms
film companies	fundraising firms
government agencies	telecommunications firms
professional journals	editorial departments
consumer organizations	theatres
multimedia firms	firms engaged in science and technology
self-employment	

## Ten Ways to Market Your Liberal Arts Degree.

### *Say it loud*

Don't hang your head and act doomed-when you might get bugged by parents and worst-peers for being a liberal arts graduate. A B.A. is a badge of honour and is sought out by many employers; it is a versatile career path to many positions. Because of this diversity few positions are out of the reach of the B.A. graduate. It is up to you, the more you believe in the value of your own degree the more you will believe in the choice you made and this confidence will show in all parts of a job application from your cover letter to the interview.

However, as a B.A., I understand that we tend to struggle a bit more with our careers that it seems other professions do. But the overwhelming evidence shows that the core skill sets offered by a B.A. holder are those most sought after by organizations and CEO's. It may come as some surprise that many MBA programs have more B.A.'s than BCom students in attendance. Even within Kamloops, a substantial number of lawyers and community leaders started their career with a B.A.

It seems that the specialized skills that come with other majors may seem to be an advantage; however the advantage of a B.A. is that you are not limited to one specialized area. Now, following graduation this may seem like a huge disadvantage, but employers can train for a specific set of skill. What you offer is a natural aptitude for critical thinking, problem solving, lifelong learning and project management (how many papers did you juggle?) Experts say most people may experience many position changes though in related careers through their working life-thus specialized skills may not have the same value as flexible skills in the long run. Flexible, multitasked oriented, people persons are often the key words in job positions advertised-who better than a B.A. fits this description?

### **Passion**

The great thing about a B.A. is that graduates were motivated by their passion not solely motivated by how much money they could make from their major. The motivation comes from a joy in learning more about a particular subject area. Of course this does not apply to all, but I bet many of you had a few subjects that got your blood excited for the possibilities. This passion can translate into your cover letter and job interviews. Of course the chances that most of the positions you apply to will not directly apply to your major-what will come out is your passion, dedication, and willingness to learn and if you have done well academically this success becomes an employment advantage for you.

### **Tell Your Story**

Focusing your cover letter and resume to tell your story is the key to career planning. The generic application is no more effective than posting your picture on a telephone pole with the caption *"looking for work."* The better your cover letter and resume tells your story in relation to the position you are applying for the better. As a former employer and now career educator I can always predict that a lack of focus in career comes across especially in the cover letter. Remember that focus can be massaged by working with your schools career centre, and many of these centres extend their support to their alumni. Assessments of your focus and passion can help you align your career approach with your skills, values and interests. I always tell my students that the great advantage of a B.A. is to use it to explore your career-that when you get your first job you are not in prison, this is not a life-time commitment.

### **Know yourself**

The skills that most employers universally seek are those that B.A. students possess. Current research of top employers (NACE 2010) shows that communication and flexibility are by far the skills sought after by employers. Due to your B.A. you have learned to communicate both orally and in written form. (remember all those late night papers and nervous class presentations) Whatever career role you find yourself in at the modern workplace, values, written and oral communications are key. Gone are the days where one could hide in a cubical for 30 years (and who would want to?). Lists of skills you have as a B.A. student can go on and on here is but one short list of B.A. skills that are most useful for your career development.

### **Skills College Grads Possess**

- Analytical
- Dramatizing ideas of problems
- Communication
- Advising people writing reports
- Customer Service
- Bookkeeping
- Problem solver
- Increasing productivity
- Inventing new ideas
- Displaying ideas graphically
- Updating files
- Analyzing data
- Speaking in public
- Confronting other people
- Listening to others
- Managing an organization

- Handling detail work
- Imagining new solutions
- Supervising others
- Running meetings
- Teaching classes
- Organizing people and tasks
- Motivating others
- Coordinating events
- Finding information
- Counseling people
- Scheduling
- Selling products
- Office management
- Handling complaints
- Administering programs
- Arranging social functions
- Evaluating programs
- Corresponding with others
- Entertaining people
- Dispensing information
- Sketching charts and diagrams
- Planning organizational needs
- Collecting money
- Compiling statistics
- Editing publications
- Raising funds
- Setting up demonstrations
- Meeting the public
- Managing your own time
- Interviewing people
- Enduring long hours
- Escorting VIPs on tours
- Investigating problems
- Persuading others
- Delegating responsibility
- Advertising/promoting events
- Proposing alternate approaches
- Interpreting languages
- Preparing materials
- Working under pressure
- Working collaboratively with people with different backgrounds
- Making decisions with incomplete information

### ***Strengths Employers Love***

- Enthusiastic
- Happy, cheerful countenance
- Eager to work long hours
- Confident
- Desire to advance
- Sincere, authentic
- Willing to learn

- Assertive, forthright
- Curious
- Tactful, diplomatic
- Willing to relocate
- Friendly
- Flexible
- Responsible
- Punctual, reliable
- Effective with ambiguity
- Learning and synthesizing new ideas
- Take initiative
- Energetic
- Persistent
- Able to discuss ideas and options without being defensive
- Interested in organization as a whole
- Willing to pitch in wherever needed

(from [How to Get Any Job with Any Major](#), Ten Speed Press, (c) 2004 Donald Asher)

### ***Do I need More?***

Despite having such a versatile degree, many B.A. students still find they may need to refine their skills. Certainly those that plan to teach, practice medicine or law will require additional post-secondary education. However, there are a few courses that a B.A. could take without extensive time or money expended. These courses could be completed at night or through distance education. Courses that provide enhanced skills in: Computers, Accounting, Marketing/Business planning or Human Resources. The key is to study job ads and get a sense of common themes that organizations are seeking for skills and qualifications. Give yourself an honest assessment, do I really have everything I need or are there a few courses that would help me be more marketable?

### ***Tell me about yourself or Your Resume is your story.***

Most resumes have a section entitled “Related Skills” or “Qualifications Summary” this is the spot that is perfect for you to tell your story as it relates to the position you are applying for. If you have some of the skills that are posted in the job description, this is the section where you write them down (if you are confident you have them). This section is the best place to highlight your B.A. skills. But be careful of the generic resume/cover letter trap. Each resume and cover should be tailored to the position and organization you are applying to. These days, thanks to Mr./Ms. Google, there is no excuse for an applicant not to reference some relevant information on the organization they are applying to.

Often I work with students who are Psychology/Sociology Majors, a very “artsy” degree. Students have usually lots of volunteer/extracurricular activity but little work experience. Students from this field are often interested in Human Resources or Marketing. Here are some tips on how to inform the employer of your passion and skills.

1. Creative problem solver-solver who excels at conflict resolution, as well as creating positive solutions and following through to implementation.
2. Disciplined and highly organized-a self starter who coordinates, manages and juggles board and campus student committees, numerous daily meeting and classes and well as a demanding school load.

3. Committed competitor who as demonstrated drive toward excellence through achievement of being voted class/group/committee president 3 years running and holding a black belt in karate.
4. Leadership-oriented university student with a strong academic track record, strong work ethic and integrity.
5. Computer-proficient problem solver with skill covering the Suite of Microsoft programs plus additional coursework in programming, accounting and business software.

### ***The Rest of the Story-Your Cover Letter.***

After 15 years as a career counselor and I am convinced the cover letter is the most important part of your application package. This document is your chance to pick two or three elements of your skills as they relate to the position applied for and tell your story of how those skills will be of benefit to the organization based on their needs not yours. The cover letter is a narrative to help the employer see the connections between your B.A. and their needs. Again do not fall in the pit of a generic cover letter, these letters when compared to ones that are specific to a company stand out and end up at the shredder. This is your chance to show that you know yourself, are proud of your degree, have passion for the area you are applying to and understand the organization. So, use those communication skills to come up with a unique opening line or a spin on your course or extracurricular work.

Finally, avoid the canned opening line of "I saw your position in the Globe and Mail and it suits my...blah blah". Instead develop a unique statement that stands out from the rest. Why do this? In the spring of 2010 an employer shared with me that in 2009 they had only received 20 resumes for a B.A. research position in government. This spring she received over 300 resumes for one position-this of course is due to the change in the labour market as a result of the economic crises of 2008. The point of this story is to illustrate that with many resumes to read and choose from those that are unique will stand out.

One final cover letter bonus: Your cover letter will showcase your writing and logical thinking skills. The fact that you are B.A. student/grad has prepared you to write a compelling, well written cover letter that will impress your future employer.

### ***Job Interviews-Made for the B.A. Graduate.***

Here is your chance to shine and now expand on your story as related to the position you are being interviewed for! Imagine if you are asked if you are a team player and to provide examples. Well you are in a great position to say that you have worked on over 30 group projects over your four year degree. 30 projects! That is incredible! There are professionals with over 20 years of experience that may not have worked on 30 group projects. This is your B.A. advantage-use the work and passion and skills you have gained to show your pride to an employer. There are many questions and possible answers, some good questions and some awful. Employers that are larger and have a Human Resource Department tend to have a better process and better questions. Smaller companies without HR professionals may ask you questions from Google searches such as: "*what are the best interview questions ever*" often these questions are goofy and do not give you as much as a chance to showcase your B.A. skills. For example, the question "*why should I hire you*" often is asked-however at the end of the day it does not help an employer make a decision. Nonetheless, it is asked so here is one possible answer-"*Because I know that the one constant in any organization is change-your organization will undergo change and my strong liberal arts education prepares me for this level of flexibility and to adapt to the changes that your company and my position will face*".

Referencing some change that the company is currently experiencing (gained from Mr./Ms. Google) provides a great response to this question. The bottom line is the interview is like an essay or exam. You wouldn't go into an exam without studying? (perhaps) or write a history paper without references. The interview is the same process, know your topic (you), know the subject (the company) and prepare accordingly.

*( There are many books articles on this subject one I recommend is "The 250 Job Interview Questions you'll most likely be asked...and the answers that will get you hired!" Peter Veruki, Adams Media, an F+W Publications Company)*

### ***A final word about B.A. Self Esteem***

I often hear from students while waiting in line prior to convocation "I have a B.A. what am I going to do?" My goal as a career counselor working with B.A. students is to break this pattern of career defeat prior to graduation. Maintain a positive attitude about the value of your B.A... Don't be the pessimist or defeatist who whines, "I guess I will go work at Earl's or work at the mine because there is nothing I can do with a B.A." As B.A. graduates, we have to be proud of the work we have put into our degree, confident that employers will translate this confidence and evidence of hard work into a position.